

DID THEY BELIEVE?

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I. Introduction

The wedding feast in Cana celebrated a marriage covenant between the bride and the groom. They were certainly friends of Jesus, for He would not have been invited otherwise. Most likely relatives and friends—including Jesus’ mother and His disciples—packed the wedding. The large attendance probably accounts for the depletion of the wine. Here Jesus performed His first recorded sign (John 2:11a): the changing of water into wine. Immediately after seeing this sign, *His disciples believed [episteusan] in Him* (John 2:11b). The form of this verb is aorist. The tense records the fact of their belief without further comment.

The belief of the disciples upon seeing the sign is quite consistent with the book’s purpose statement, *these [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name* (John 20:31). Few would question the disciples’ regeneration in John 2:11. The aorist for *believe* raises no such questions here.

Why would another aorist (only twelve verses later) prompt questioning the faith of the multitude who *believed [episteusan] in His name when they saw the signs which He did* (John 2:23)? It is the same tense that records the faith of the disciples in 2:11. One commentary asserts, “The verb ‘believed’ is in the aorist tense. Many came to the point of decision. Yet we should probably not regard them as having a profound faith.”¹

John 2:11 shows that making such a tense distinction between the aorist and present tenses of *believe* is specious. Concerning the Greek verb *to believe (pisteuō)* a grammarian asserts:

The present was the tense of choice most likely because the NT writers by and large saw *continual* belief as a necessary condition of salvation. Along these lines, it seems significant that the *promise* of salvation is almost always given to *ol pisteuwn* [the one who believes, present tense] . . . almost never to *ol pisteusa* [the one who believes/believed, aorist tense] (apart from Mark 16:16, John 7:39, and Heb 4:3 come the closest . . .).²

This article will consider lexical, grammatical, and contextual evidence (i.e., the affected meaning) to show that this distinction rests on shaky ground.

The Importance of the Affected Meaning

Affected Meaning Defined

Much controversy has surrounded discussions of verb tense. Wallace writes, “Our treatment on tenses is intentionally simpler than other elements of the verb largely because there are at the moment so many unresolved issues in the Greek tense.”³ This

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 205.

² Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 621, n. 22 (italics his).

³ *Ibid.*, 496, n. 3.

present controversy focuses on two elements. Unfortunately, these are the only issues of verb tense: aspect and time. Wallace notes, “In general, *tense* in Greek involves two elements: *aspect* (kind of action, [sometimes called Aktionsart, though a difference does need to be made between the two]) and *time*.”⁴ This article will focus on Aktionsart (“aspect in combination with lexical, grammatical, or contextual features”⁵), time, and the relation of Aktionsart and time to Wallace’s view on the contrast between the present and aorist forms of the Greek verb *to believe* (*pisteuō*).

The term *Aktionsart* has come to signify the “point of view from which the action or state is regarded.”⁶ Wallace writes:

In general, we can say that *aspect* is the *unaffected meaning* while *Aktionsart* is *aspect in combination with lexical, grammatical, or contextual features*. Thus, the present tense views the action from within, without respect to beginning or end (aspect), while some uses of the present tense can be iterative, historical, futuristic, etc. (all of these belong to Aktionsart and are meanings of the verb affected by other features of the language).⁷

The affected meaning of a verb plays a vital role in exegesis, since lexical, grammatical, and contextual features are essential for defining the time and aspect of any Greek verb. For example, lexical issues play a vital role because every verb has a nature of its very own. The verb *to go*, an action verb, is fundamentally different from the verb *to know*, a stative verb. While the former deals with location and has a logical beginning, middle, and end, the latter’s beginning blends into its ongoing state. Moreover, its state may never end.

Examples of Affected Meaning

The first category Wallace discusses is the iterative present, “an event that *repeatedly* happens.”⁸ For example, Paul exhorts his readers in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to *pray without ceasing* [*adialeiptōs*]. This means that believers are to pray repeatedly. Neither the grammar of the verb (present tense) nor the lexical entry (to pray) is the source of the idea of *repeatedly*. This concept is external to the verb itself, coming from an adverb in the context (*without ceasing*). In this case, the adverb affects the meaning of the verb. In other words the use of the present does not nail down the correct aspect.

Wallace’s second category is the historical present: “The present tense may be used to describe a past event, either for the sake of *vividness* or to *highlight* some aspect of the narrative.”⁹ This category is common in narrative literature. Matthew’s Garden of Gethsemane narrative says, *Then He came* [*erchetai*, present tense] *to the disciples and found* [*euriskei*, present tense] *them sleeping, and said* [*legei*, present tense] *to Peter, . . .*” These verbs are translated as past (*came*, *found*, and *said*), rather than as present (*comes*, *finds*, and *says*). It is not that the lexical nature of the verbs demands it. Rather, the context is narrative that describes events that occurred a number of years before John

⁴ Ibid., 496.

⁵ Ibid., 499.

⁶ Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3 of James H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1963), 59 (emphasis in original).

⁷ Wallace, *Grammar*, 499.

⁸ Ibid., 520 (italics his).

⁹ Ibid., 526 (italics his).

wrote. The present tense allows for this usage. Once again, context is what determines the proper interpretation of the present tense. Narrative context affects the meaning of tense.

Wallace also includes the futuristic present, which “adds the connotations of immediacy and certainty.”¹⁰ Passages such as John 4:25, *Messiah is coming*, look to the future with both certainty and immediacy. The meaning is affected by the context and the lexical nature of the verb *to come*.

Conclusion

Contrary to what many commentaries assert in John 2:23, the use of an aorist tense does not call into question the people’s faith. Tenses have a variety of uses. Turner misses this point when he relegates the aorist to momentary (point) action and the present to ongoing action:

The chief kinds of action are: (1) continuous, which grammarians call *linear*, and (2) instantaneous, which they call *punctiliar*. By their very meaning some verbs can express only either one or the other *Aktionsart*, but the majority may be used in both ways. The aorist stem expresses punctiliar, and the present expresses linear action. . . . If there is no augment to the stem we may assume that the speaker refers either to some contemporary action or else he is not concerned with the time as such at all.¹¹

Fanning correctly criticizes this view:

To judge from actual usage, the aorist is quite tolerant of actions which are instantaneous and of verbs and phrases which portray actions as instantaneous. When the lexical sense of the verb or phrase is momentary, this sense is certainly valid for the overall aorist function (e.g., Mark 3:5 ἀπεκρίσθη ἡ αὐτοῦ; Acts 5:5 ὁ Ἀνανίας . . . περὶ ἐξέμυξεν). On the other hand, the aorist is also compatible with durative or iterative actions, verbs, and phrases (e.g., Heb. 11:7, 9, 12, 13 κἀτεσκεύασεν κίβωτον; παρῶν ἐῖς τὸ ἐπάγγελμα; ἐγέννησαν . . . καὶ τὰ ἀστρά του οὐρανοῦ τῶν πλῆθει; ἀπεκρίναντο οὗτοι πάντες). The momentary, durative, or iterative sense thus appears to come from some element outside of the aspect itself, usually the lexical character of the verb either by itself or in combination with the aspect.¹²

This clearly illustrates the importance of taking into account a verb’s affected meaning.

Linear and Punctiliar Action

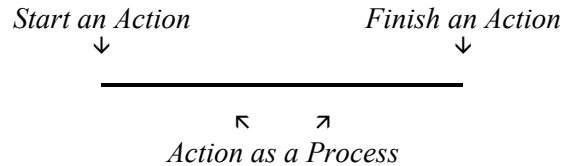
A. Linear Action Defined

¹⁰ Ibid., 535.

¹¹ Turner, *Syntax*, 59.

¹² Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 88–89.

Linear action depicts action as a process rather than as a simple event. While Turner notes that “linear action is understood as taking place at the same time as the speech,”¹³ it may well have an (unspecified) beginning and ending point. For example, if someone says, “Joe is doing his homework,” the start and finish are implicit (only because of the lexical nature of the verb). Joe started doing his homework in the past and will complete his homework in the future. Thus, the action of the sentence is linear. While the action’s inception and completion are implied, it is beyond the scope of a verb’s affected meaning to define the beginning and end of an action. Thus, linear action views the verb internally (as a process) without commenting on any start or finish.



1 Timothy 3:14 says, *These things I write to you*. Clearly, Paul began to write to Timothy at a point in time. Subsequently he was in the midst of writing it. At another point he finished writing the epistle. Timothy received the completed letter, but *I write* does not mention an end. The beginning is assumed, yet it is beyond the scope of the verb’s linear action. The beginning and end are implicit.

In John 11, Jesus reassures Martha that her brother will indeed rise again (John 11:23). She then says to Him, *I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day* (John 11:24). At that moment in time, Martha was in the state of knowing. The verb does not state the beginning or end of this action. The verb implies that Martha, when she learned about the resurrection, *learned* and thus knew of the resurrection. However, neither the context nor the verb’s lexical nature communicates that Martha forgot or disbelieved this truth.

Turner contends that linear verb forms do not define the ending point of their action.¹⁴ An undefined (unstated) ending point does not imply unending action. Many view linear action as that which is continuous and seemingly unending. For example, Wallace translates the articular nominative participle *ho pisteuōn* in—John 3:16 as “everyone who [continually] believes in him should not perish” (brackets in original).¹⁵ He suggests that in John’s Gospel “there seems to be a qualitative distinction between the ongoing act of believing [present tense] and the simple fact of believing [aorist].”¹⁶ He also says:

The aspectual force of the present ὁ πιστεύων [present participle *to believe*] seems to be in contrast with ὁ πιστεύσας [aorist participle, *to believe*]. The aorist is used only eight times . . . [and] sometimes used to describe believers as such and thus has a generic force The present occurs six times as often (43 times), most often in soteriological contexts Thus it seems that since the aorist participle was a live option to describe a “believer,” it is unlikely that when the present was used, it was aspectually flat. The

¹³ Ibid, 60.

¹⁴ Cf. Turner, *Syntax*, 60.

¹⁵ Wallace, *Grammar*, 522.

¹⁶ Ibid.

present was the tense of choice most likely because the NT writers by and large saw *continual* belief as a necessary condition of salvation. Along these lines, it seems significant that the *promise* of salvation is almost always given to *ol pisteuwn* [present] . . . , almost never to *ol pisteusa*" [aorist] (apart from Mark 16:16, John 7:39, and Heb 4:3 come the closest . . .).¹⁷

Thus, Wallace believes that the aorist characterizes the one who has come to the point of belief, yet not truly believed. Furthermore, he states that, because *continual belief* is necessary for salvation, the articular participle *ho pisteuōn* ("the one who believes") must be continuous or customary.

The Aspectual Difference between Aorists and Presents

Wallace understands the present and the aorist differentiating customary action (the ongoing present) from punctiliar or constative action (the "once-and-for-all" aorist). The other two possibilities, ingressive and consummative, do not make as much sense. If the aorist were to describe believers who have not come to the point of saving faith as ingressive, this would imply that these believers have actually entered into the state of believing. Furthermore, if Wallace were to take the aorist (*ho pisteusas*) as consummative, the referents would have formerly been characterized by belief.¹⁸ Only the punctiliar aorist makes sense with Wallace's view. Yet, does the aorist form of *to believe* connote this?

As Fanning pointed out earlier, the aorist form can clearly convey a durative force. Four aorists from Hebrews 11:7–13 illustrate. In v. 7, Noah prepared (aorist) an ark (a process which required many years). In v. 9, Abraham lived (aorist) as an alien (his entire life of 175 years). In v. 12, from Abraham came (aorist) numerous generations of descendants. And in v. 13, all those previously mentioned in Hebrews 11 died (aorist) in faith. Clearly, all of these actions did not occur at a point in time, but rather over a linear period. Noah built the ark over a 100-year period. If the action conveyed by the aorist form of the verb *to believe* lasted 100 years, even those whose belief was expressed by the aorist would die in belief! Abraham's seed has populated the earth for several millennia. Clearly, the aorist it represents in Hebrews 11:12 conveys linear action.

Conclusion

Although Wallace praises the work of Frank Stagg,¹⁹ he seems to fall into the very same trap Stagg warns against. Stagg notes:

The *Aktionsart* of the aorist is introduced in the grammars as "punctiliar," "point action," "snapshot action," etc. Properly understood, this is serviceable. Careful grammarians make it clear that the "punctiliar" idea belongs to the writer's manner of presentation and not necessarily to the action itself. . . . From this follow the ill-advised arguments of exegetes or theologians that because the aorist is used, the reference has to be to a single action or

¹⁷ Ibid., 621, n. 22.

¹⁸ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, views the consummative aorist as the opposite of the ingressive "since it emphasizes the end-point of the action instead of the beginning-point."

¹⁹ Ibid., 557, n. 8.

even a “once-and-for-all” action. It is this line of argument that is false and needs to be challenged; the action may be momentary, singular, or “once and for all,” but it is not the use of the aorist that makes it such.²⁰

It is the lexical and contextual features of the text which communicate the action of *to believe*.

The Lexical Nature of *to Believe*

The literature’s (purely) grammatical consideration of Aktionsart has largely ignored the lexical meaning of the verb *to believe*. It should be classified as a stative verb—a verb without dynamics, or change. It is a state, rather than an action (e.g., building, walking, writing, etc.). Vendler notes that there are many different stative verbs (e.g., knowing, believing, loving, having, possessing, desiring, wanting, liking, hating, etc.).²¹

When one believes, one enters into the state of linear belief—the end is unspecified. Fanning classifies *believing* (*piesteuō*) as a state in which “there is no exertion to maintain knowledge/attitude or to act in keeping with it.”²² If one says, “Joe believes,” the verb implies that he is in the state of believing and will continue in that state continuously unless a change arises. If one says, “Joe believed that the earth is round,” the verb does not define how long his “linear” belief continued. It is likely that Joe died believing that the earth was round. Because of the nature of the verb *to believe*, it should be assumed that, unless otherwise noted, the state will continue unhindered.

Contextual Proof for True Belief Occurring in the Aorist

If the aorist form of the verb *to believe* were to describe a person that has come to the point of belief but fallen short, the contextual evidence should support this conclusion. However, this is not the case.

The Tax Collectors (Matthew 21:32)

The twenty-first chapter of Matthew’s Gospel contains a story about Jesus’ authority being challenged. After refusing to explain His authority, Jesus tells the elders and the chief priests the Parable of the Two Sons.

In order to make a contrast, Jesus states, *Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you* (Matthew 21:31b). To eliminate any residual confusion, Jesus explains, *For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe [aorist] him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe [aorist] him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe [aorist] him* (Matthew 21:32). If Jesus meant for the contrast to be between the true faith of the tax collectors and prostitutes and the lack of faith on the part of the chief priests and elders, why did Matthew use aorist verbs for both groups? This seems incongruent with a specious-faith view of aorist uses of believe.

²⁰ Frank Stagg, “The Abused Aorist,” *JBL* 91 (1972), 222.

²¹ Cf. Zeno Vendler, “Verbs and Times,” in *Linguistics in Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 99–108.

²² Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 136.

The Wedding Miracle (John 2:11)

After Jesus performed his first miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, John writes that the disciples *believed* [*episteusan*] *in Him* (John 2:11). This began Jesus' series of signs that would prove that He truly was the Christ. Wallace states:

John's tendency is to use a progressive or completed tense (i.e., either imperfect, present, or perfect) for belief which leads to salvation (e.g., in 3:16 he uses a present participle—*πα" ol pisteuwn*), but an undefined or punctiliar tense (i.e., aorist) for a belief which stops short of true salvation.²³

As stated earlier, John 20:30–31 gives the purpose for Jesus performing signs: *Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.* Thus, if the purpose of the signs was so that people would believe that Jesus is the Christ, it would seem that the disciples truly came to faith in Christ for eternal life in John 2:11. What reason exists to claim that the disciples' faith was false? All three verbs in 2:11 are aorist (*made, manifested, and believed*). It is clear from the context that John was retelling the completed story from a later standpoint. Thus, John was in no way trying to convey that the disciples did not truly come to faith in Christ. He was merely retelling a completed story from his present point of view, and he used the aorist to show that the disciples entered into the state of believing in Christ. Fanning correctly notes that "the aorist aspect with STATES denotes most frequently the *entrance* of the subject into the condition denoted by the verb."²⁴

The Faith of His Disciples (John 2:23)

John 2:23 states, *Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed [episteusan] in His name when they saw the signs which He did.* Concerning this verse, Morris writes, "The verb 'believed' is in the aorist tense; many came to the point of decision. Yet we should probably not regard them as having profound faith."²⁵ After calling into question their *aorist* faith he continues:

To believe on the basis of the signs is to take as basic something we can see and to which we give weight on the basis of our experience. Jesus calls people to trust him for what he is, not because he passes the tests we set. Those who had been attracted by the miracles would have been ready to try to make an earthly king of him (cf. 6:15). But

²³ Daniel B. Wallace, "Greek Exegesis in Sermonic Structure," in *1997 DTS Class Notes*, 3.4.B.

²⁴ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 137.

²⁵ Morris, *John*, 181. In Matthew 21:32 (discussed on the previous page), there are three aorists of one is negated and two are affirmed. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 538, writes, "They *did believe him*, which means that they responded to his call for repentance and amended their whole way of living and of approach to God." Although it is unfortunate that Morris muddies the gospel here, it is almost equally regrettable that his commentary on John makes contradictory statements. He is not able to sustain his view of the aorist in Scripture.

he did not trust himself to them. He looked for genuine conversion, not enthusiasm for the spectacular.²⁶

As noted above, the very point of the signs was to bring people to faith in Christ for eternal life (John 20:30–31). To deny this fact is to disregard the purpose of the Gospel of John and of the signs themselves. Furthermore, the view that believing in the name of Jesus is somehow less than salvific cannot be sustained in other passages (cf. John 1:12; 3:18; 1 John 5:13).²⁷ Surely, no one would deny that 1 John 5:13, *These things I have written to you who believe [tois pisteuousin] in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life*, refers to genuine eternal life.

Many would regard the faith in v. 23 as false because of vv. 24–25: *But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man*. Yet, there is good reason Jesus did not trust His mission to new believers. Only six chapters later, many Jews came to believe in Jesus (John 8:30–31, aorist and perfect) and then after learning more about who He was, *picked up stones to throw at Him* (John 8:59). He had good reason not to trust new converts. They had entered into the state of believing, but their line of belief was not long enough to be trusted with great tasks. Similarly, no newly hired Secret Service guards the President on the first day.²⁸

John's account of the disciples' belief and the belief of the crowd does not seek to distinguish between true and spurious faith. On the contrary, John was merely trying to show the entrance into a state of belief.

The Woman at the Well (John 4:39–41)

One of the greatest illustrations of the fact that the aorist form of *to believe* does convey true faith is found in the account of the Samaritan woman. John writes, *many of the Samaritans of that city believed [episteusan, aorist] in Him because of the word of the woman who testified* (John 4:39). Some might prematurely assert that they did not truly believe on the account of the woman. However, context clarifies that some did believe the woman: *many more believed [episteusan, aorist] because of His own word* (John 4:41). In fact, John goes on to quote them as saying, *Now we believe [pisteuomen, present], not because of what you said, for we ourselves heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world* (John 4:42).

While John recounted the belief of the Samaritans from a narration-of-past-events standpoint, he used the aorist. However, he used the present to quote the Samaritans (their viewpoint). Thus, the point of view is in this passage. John's point of view was the present relative to his writing. The Samaritans' viewpoint was the present as well—relative to their speaking. Thus, John used the aorist form of *to believe* to show that they had believed prior to the Samaritans' speaking. He used the present to capture

²⁶ Morris, *John*, 182.

²⁷ Though these passages contain non-present forms of *pisteuō*, saving faith can be expressed through *pisteuō + ei* "to *ō*hōma" ("believe in the name").

²⁸ There is an intentional verbal correlation in vv. 23 and 24. Just as many trusted (*episteusan*, aorist) in His name, He did not trust (*episteuen*, imperfect) Himself to them. Some might say that the latter appears in the imperfect because Jesus truly did not entrust Himself to the crowd while the crowd did not really trust in His name. Yet, this does not seem to be the case. It is more probably a feature of highlighting. Fanning, 243, writes, "The contrast at times is one of *descriptive vs. factual* narration: the imperfect highlights the manner of the occurrence while the aorist merely relates the fact of it." The usage of the imperfect might also involve what is referred to as "simultaneous occurrence" (Ibid., 244).

the words of the Samaritans which was contemporaneous with the narrative. Therefore, the tenses of the verbs simply convey that they had entered into the state of believing prior to v. 42 and they were already in the state of believing in v. 42.

The Day of the Great Feast (John 7:39)

On a great day of feasting, Jesus says, *He who believes [ho pisteuōn, present] in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water* (John 7:38). John then writes, *But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing [hoi pisteusantes, aorist] in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.* Concerning this verse, Wallace notes that “the promise of salvation is almost always given to *ol pisteuwn* . . . , almost never to *ol pisteusa*” (apart from Mark 16:16, John 7:39 and Heb 4:3 come the closest . . .).²⁹ Although Wallace does say that the believers in John 7:39 come close to being qualified as saved individuals, he implies that they are not given the promise of eternal life. Nonetheless, v. 39 was John’s explanation of v. 38. Jesus said from his point of view (contemporaneous with his speaking) that those who believe (present) in Him will receive the Holy Spirit. Then John from his viewpoint (subsequent to Jesus’ quote) said that those who believed (aorist) in Him would receive the Holy Spirit. This passage is not referring to true and false faith. The tense distinction is employed because of the different viewpoints in the discourse.

The Faith of the Rulers (John 12:44)

John contrasts those who did not believe in Jesus (John 12:37–40) with those who did, namely, the rulers (John 12:42). Because the rulers did not confess Jesus openly, some would say that they did not truly believe; however, given the contrast John makes between those who *did not believe [episteuon, imperfect] in Him* (12:37) with those who *believed [episteusan, aorist] in Him* (12:42), it seems more likely that they truly believed but *loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God* (12:43).

In the next verse, Jesus says, *Those who believe [ho pisteuon, present participle] in Me do not believe [pisteuei, present] in Me but in the one who sent Me.* Once again, by using the present tense of *to believe* in direct discourse, John seems to demonstrate the contemporaneous nature of the present, in contrast to the antecedent nature of the aorist (John 12:42). Therefore, by using the aorist tense, John desires to communicate time preceding his writing.

The Philippian Jailor (Acts 16:31)

The narrative concerning the Philippian jailor in Acts 16 is one of the most powerful gospel texts in Acts. The jailor asks Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30b). And they answered, *Believe [pisteuson, aorist imperative] on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household* (Acts 16:31). Marshall explains that “the way of salvation associated with ‘the Most High God’ (16:17) is by believing in Jesus.”³⁰ Clearly, Paul and Silas were not telling the jailor, “Come to the point of decision but do not believe and you will be saved.” Rather, Luke was using the

²⁹ Wallace, *Grammar*, 621, n. 22.

³⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, TNTC, ed. R.V.G. Tasker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 273.

aorist to communicate Paul and Silas's wish that the jailor would enter into the state of believing.

The Faith of Abraham (James 2:19)

One of the greatest illustrations that the aorist and present forms of the verb *to believe* can both be referring to one who has truly believed can be found in the second chapter of the Epistle of James. In this controversial passage, James writes, *You believe [pisteueis, present] that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder (2:19)* and then later writes, *“And Abraham believed [episteusen, aorist] God, and it was reckoned to Him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God (2:23)*. It is interesting to note that most who hold to the specious-aorist faith view believe that the first reference (v. 19) is to spurious faith while the second, to true faith (v. 23).³¹ This is incongruent.

James was not trying to differentiate true and spurious faith in these verses. He merely denoted contemporaneous time by using the present form of *to believe* and antecedent time by using the aorist form. Thus, given the popular view of James—that James is writing to distinguish between true and spurious faith—it would seem that those with dead faith and demons possess eternal life and Abraham is bound for Hell.

In reality, James' point of view in vv. 19–20 is different from that of vv. 21–23. James writes from the present relative to the argument over whether faith without works is dead and in the future relative to the reference of Abraham.

Conclusion

A survey of several uses of the aorist and present forms of *to believe* in their respective contexts with a clear view of the verb's lexical nature reveals that the authors of the New Testament were not trying to contrast spurious faith and true faith by contrasting the aorist and present forms of the verb. The New Testament writers were only trying to communicate the viewpoint and stative nature of the action.

While it is a good idea to note the linear and punctiliar nature of a particular verbal instance, to say that the aorist denotes a “once-and-for-all” action and that the present denotes continuous, unending action is to say more than the New Testament writers meant to convey. Certainly, the present tense can convey continuous action; however, as Fanning correctly notes, the continuous nature of the action is still contemporaneous with the author's speaking/writing. Thus, it can be employed by an author in order to contrast various viewpoints.

The fact that the present form of *to believe* is linear does not imply that it is without end. Few would deny that John the Baptist (*ho baptistes*, present) could no longer baptize after his death. Nevertheless, he was still referred to as John, the one who baptizes. Moreover, while the aorist can certainly denote punctiliar action, the conclusion that aorist always denotes a “once-and-for-all” action is unwarranted. Certainly Noah did not build the ark instantaneously.

With all of this in view, to say that the aorist form of *to believe* is punctiliar or “once-and-for-all” action and therefore refers to spurious faith is to say more than the New Testament writers conveyed.

³¹ Cf. Wallace, *Grammar*, 219; 465, n. 48; 604.